CLAIMS

We claim:

[c1]   1.   A method in a computer system for authorizing communications, the method comprising:

receiving a communication sent from a sender to a recipient;

determining whether the sender is authorized to send communications to the recipient;

when it is determined that the sender is authorized to send communications to the recipient, providing the received communication to the recipient; and

when it is determined that the sender is not authorized to send communications to the recipient,

sending an authorization communication to the sender, the authorization communication requesting authorization information from the sender to determine whether the sender should be authorized to send communications to the recipient;

in response to sending the authorization communication to the sender, receiving from the sender authorization information; and

when the received authorization information indicates that the sender is authorized, indicating that the sender is authorized to send communications to the recipient and providing the received communication to the recipient.

[c2]   2.   The method of claim 1 wherein the communications are electronic mail messages.

[c3]   3.   The method of claim 2 wherein the providing of the received communication to the recipient includes placing the received communication in an inbox of the recipient.

[c4]   4.   The method of claim 1 wherein the authorization communication includes a link to a display page through which the sender provides the authorization information.

[c5]   5.   The method of claim 1 wherein the authorization information includes a response to instructions, the instructions being designed to make it difficult for an automated system to provide an appropriate response.

[c6]   6.   A method for authorizing communications, the method comprising:

receiving a communication sent from a sender to a recipient;

sending an authorization communication to the sender, the authorization communication requesting authorization information from the sender to determine whether the sender should be authorized to send communications to the recipient;

in response to sending the authorization communication to the sender, receiving from the sender authorization information; and

when the received authorization information indicates that the sender is authorized, providing the received communication to the recipient.

[c7]   7.   The method of claim 6 wherein the communications are electronic mail messages.

[c8]   8.   The method of claim 7 wherein the providing of the received communication to the recipient includes placing the received communication in an inbox of the recipient.

[c9]   9.   The method of claim 6 wherein the authorization communication includes a link to a display page through which the sender provides the authorization information.

[c10]   10.   The method of claim 6 wherein communications are electronic mail messages and the sender provides the authorization information in an electronic mail message.

[c11]   11.   The method of claim 6 wherein the authorization information includes a response to instructions, the instructions being designed to make it difficult for an automated system to provide an appropriate response.

[c12]   12.   The method of claim 6 including before sending an authorization communication to the sender, determining whether the sender is already authorized to send communications to the recipient and when authorized, providing the received communication to the recipient.

[c13]   13.   The method of claim 6 including when the received authorization information indicates that the sender is authorized, recording an indication so that subsequent communications sent from the sender to the recipient can be provided to the recipient without receiving additional authorization information from the sender.

[c14]   14.   The method of claim 13 wherein the recorded indication only indicates that the sender is authorized to send to that recipient.

[c15]   15.   The method of claim 13 including receiving from the recipient an indication of senders that are authorized to send communications to the recipient.

[c16]   16.   The method of claim 13 including receiving from the recipient an indication of senders that are no longer authorized to send communications to the recipient.

[c17]   17.   The method of claim 6 wherein a sender is requested to provide authorization information for each different recipient to whom the sender sends a communication.

[c18]   18.   The method of claim 6 wherein the authorization communication include an authorization identifier for identifying the received communication.

[c19]   19.   The method of claim 6 including notifying a recipient of received communications that have not been authorized.

[c20]   20.   The method of claim 6 including periodically sending to the recipient a communication that includes advertisements.

[c21]   21.   The method of claim 20 including suppressing the sending of the communication that includes advertisements to recipients who meet a certain criterion.

[c22]   22.   The method of claim 21 wherein the criterion is enrollment in a no-solicitation service.

[c23]   23.   The method of claim 6 wherein when the received authorization information indicates that the sender is not authorized, providing the received communication to the recipient with an indication that it was sent by a sender who could not be authorized.

[c24]   24.   The method of claim 23 wherein the indication is placing authorized and not authorized communication in separate folders.

[c25]   25.   The method of claim 6 wherein the receiving includes using a recipient identification and password to retrieve the communication from an electronic mail account of the recipient.

[c26]   26.   The method of claim 25 wherein the communication is retrieved from an inbox.

[c27]   27.   The method of claim 26 wherein the providing includes leaving the retrieved communication in the inbox.

[c28]   28.   The method of claim 26 including when the received authorization information indicates that the sender is not authorized, removing the communication from the inbox.

[c29]   29.   The method of claim 26 including when the received authorization information indicates that the sender is not authorized, moving the communication to a folder different from the inbox.

[c30]   30.   The method of claim 6 wherein the authorization communication includes a web page through which the sender provides the authorization information.

[c31]   31.   A authorization system for authorizing senders to send communications to recipients, the system comprising:

a component that receives a communication sent from a sender to a recipient;

a component that determines whether the sender of the received communication is authorized to send communications to the recipient;

a component that attempts to authorize the sender when it is determined that the sender is not authorized by requesting authorization information from the sender, by receiving authorization information from the sender, and by determining whether the authorization information indicates that the sender should be authorized; and

a component that provides the communication to the recipient when it is determined that the sender is authorized to send the communication to the recipient.

[c32]   32.   The authorization system of claim 31 wherein the authorization system is a subsystem of an electronic mail system.

[c33]   33.   The authorization system of claim 32 wherein the electronic mail system receives the communication and invokes the authorization system to determine whether the sender is authorized.

[c34]   34.   The authorization system of claim 31 wherein the authorization system is separate from an electronic mail system.

[c35]   35.   The authorization system of claim 34 wherein the authorization system receives the communication from the sender and wherein the authorization system sends the communication to the electronic mail system when it determines that the sender is authorized.

[c36]   36.   The authorization system of claim 34 wherein the authorization system receives the communication from the sender and wherein when the sender cannot be authorized, the authorization system sends the communication

to a folder of the electronic mail system designated for communications of the recipient from senders that is not authorized.

[c37]   37.   The authorization system of claim 34 wherein the electronic mail system receives the communication from the sender, wherein the authorization system retrieves the communication from the electronic mail system, and wherein the authorization system indicates to the electronic mail system whether the sender is authorized.

[c38]   38.   The authorization system of claim 37 wherein the authorization system indicates that the sender is authorized by leaving the communication in an inbox of the recipient.

[c39]   39.   The authorization system of claim 37 wherein the authorization system indicates that the sender is not authorized by removing the communication from the inbox of the recipient.

[c40]   40.   The authorization system of claim 39 wherein the authorization system adds the removed communication to a folder of the recipient for communications of senders who are not authorized.

[c41]   41.   The authorization system of claim 37 wherein the authorization system retrieves the communication from the electronic mail system as a result of the electronic mail system automatically forwarding communications of the recipient to the authorization system.

[c42]   42.   The authorization system of claim 31 wherein the authorization system includes an electronic mail component, wherein the authorization system retrieves the communication from an electronic mail system, wherein the authorization system determines whether the sender is authorized, and wherein

when the sender is authorized, the authorization system makes the communication available to the recipient through its electronic mail component.

[c43]   43.   The authorization system of claim 42 wherein the authorization system retrieves the communication from the electronic mail system as a result of the electronic mail system automatically forwarding communications of the recipient to the authorization system.

[c44]   44.   The authorization system of claim 42 wherein the authorization system retrieves the communication from the electronic mail system using authentication information of the recipient.

[c45]   45.   The authorization system of claim 31 wherein the requesting of authorization information from the sender includes sending an electronic mail message to the sender.

[c46]   46.   The authorization system of claim 45 wherein the electronic mail message includes a link to a web page through which the sender provides the authorization information.

[c47]   47.   The authorization system of claim 45 wherein the electronic mail message includes a web page through which the sender provides the authorization information.

[c48]   48.   The authorization system of claim 45 wherein the sender provides the authorization information in an electronic mail message.

[c49]   49.   The authorization system of claim 31 wherein the requested authorization information is used to determine whether the sender is an automated system.

[c50]   50.   The authorization system of claim 31 wherein the requested authorization information is a Turing test.

[c51]   51.   The authorization system of claim 31 including when it is determined that the sender is authorized to send the communication to the recipient, designating the sender as authorized to send to the recipient so that the authorization system sends subsequent communications from the sender to the recipient without requesting authorization information from the recipient.

[c52]   52.   The authorization system of claim 51 including revoking the designation that a sender is authorized to send to the recipient based on a criterion.

[c53]   53.   The authorization system of claim 52 wherein the criterion is that the sender has sent communications to many other recipients in a short period of time.

[c54]   54.   The authorization system of claim 52 wherein the criterion is that other recipients have requested to revoke the authorization of that sender.

[c55]   55.   The authorization system of claim 31 including a component for determining whether the sender is authorized based on other recipients for whom the sender is authorized to send communications.

[c56]   56.   A authorization system for authorizing senders to send communications to recipients, the system comprising:

means for receiving a communication sent from a sender to a recipient;

means for determining whether the sender of the received communication

is authorized to send communications to the recipient by requesting

authorization information from the sender, by receiving authorization

information from the sender, and by determining whether the authorization information indicates that the sender should be authorized; and

means for providing the communication to the recipient when it is determined that the sender is authorized to send the communication to the recipient.

[c57]   57.   The authorization system of claim 56 wherein the authorization system is a subsystem of an electronic mail system.

[c58]   58.   The authorization system of claim 57 wherein the electronic mail system receives the communication and invokes the authorization system to determine whether the sender is authorized.

[c59]   59.   The authorization system of claim 56 wherein the authorization system is separate from an electronic mail system.

[c60]   60.   The authorization system of claim 59 wherein the authorization system receives the communication from the sender and wherein the authorization system sends the communication to the electronic mail system when it determines that the sender is authorized.

[c61]   61.   The authorization system of claim 59 wherein the authorization system receives the communication from the sender and wherein when the sender cannot be authorized, the authorization system sends the communication to a folder of the electronic mail system designated for communications of the recipient from senders that cannot be authorized.

[c62]   62.   The authorization system of claim 59 wherein the electronic mail system receives the communication from the sender, wherein the authorization

system retrieves the communication from the electronic mail system, and wherein the authorization system indicates to the electronic mail system whether the sender is authorized.

[c63]   63.   The authorization system of claim 62 wherein the authorization system indicates that the sender is authorized by leaving the communication in an inbox of the recipient.

[c64]   64.   The authorization system of claim 62 wherein the authorization system indicates that the sender is not authorized by removing the communication from the inbox of the recipient.

[c65]   65.   The authorization system of claim 62 wherein the authorization system retrieves the communication from the electronic mail system as a result of the electronic mail system automatically forwarding communications of the recipient to the authorization system.

[c66]   66.   The authorization system of claim 56 wherein the authorization system includes an electronic mail component, wherein the authorization system retrieves the communication from an electronic mail system, wherein the authorization system determines whether the sender is authorized, and wherein when the sender is authorized, the authorization system makes the communication available to the recipient through its electronic mail component.

[c67]   67.   The authorization system of claim 66 wherein the authorization system retrieves the communication from the electronic mail system as a result of the electronic mail system automatically forwarding communications of the recipient to the authorization system.

[c68]   68.   The authorization system of claim 66 wherein the authorization system retrieves the communication from the electronic mail system using authentication information of the recipient.

[c69]   69.   A computer-readable medium containing instructions for controlling a computer system to authorize senders to send communications to recipients, by a method comprising:

receiving a communication sent from a sender to a recipient;

requesting authorization information from the sender;

receiving authorization information from the sender;

determining whether the authorization information indicates that the sender is authorized; and

providing the communication to the recipient when it is determined that the sender is authorized to send the communication to the recipient.

[c70]   70.   The computer-readable medium of claim 69 wherein the authorization system is a subsystem of an electronic mail system.

[c71]   71.   The computer-readable medium of claim 70 wherein the electronic mail system receives the communication and invokes the authorization system to determine whether the sender is authorized.

[c72]   72.   The computer-readable medium of claim 69 wherein the authorization system is separate from an electronic mail system.

[c73]   73.   The computer-readable medium of claim 72 wherein the authorization system receives the communication from the sender and wherein the authorization system sends the communication to the electronic mail system when it determines that the sender is authorized.

[c74]   74.   The computer-readable medium of claim 72 wherein the authorization system receives the communication from the sender and wherein when the sender cannot be authorized, the authorization system sends the communication to a folder of the electronic mail system designated for communications of the recipient from senders that are authorized.

[c75]   75.   The computer-readable medium of claim 72 wherein the electronic mail system receives the communication from the sender, wherein the authorization system retrieves the communication from the electronic mail system, and wherein the authorization system indicates to the electronic mail system whether the sender is authorized.

[c76]   76.   The computer-readable medium of claim 75 wherein the authorization system indicates that the sender is authorized by leaving the communication in an inbox of the recipient.

[c77]   77.   The computer-readable medium of claim 75 wherein the authorization system indicates that the sender is not authorized by removing the communication from the inbox of the recipient.

[c78]   78.   The computer-readable medium of claim 77 wherein the authorization system adds the removed communication to a folder of the recipient for communications of senders who are not authorized.

[c79]   79.   The computer-readable medium of claim 75 wherein the authorization system retrieves the communication from the electronic mail system as a result of the electronic mail system automatically forwarding communications of the recipient to the authorization system.

[c80]   80.   The computer-readable medium of claim 69 wherein the authorization system includes an electronic mail component, wherein the authorization system retrieves the communication from an electronic mail system, wherein the authorization system determines whether the sender is authorized, and wherein when the sender is authorized, the authorization system makes the communication available to the recipient through its electronic mail component.

[c81]   81.   The computer-readable medium of claim 80 wherein the authorization system retrieves the communication from the electronic mail system as a result of the electronic mail system automatically forwarding communications of the recipient to the authorization system.

[c82]   82.   The computer-readable medium of claim 80 wherein the authorization system retrieves the communication from the electronic mail system using authentication information of the recipient.

[c83]   83.   A method for authorizing senders to send communications to recipients, by a method comprising:

     receiving a communication sent from a sender to a recipient;

     requesting authorization information from the sender;

     receiving authorization information from the sender;

     determining whether the authorization information indicates that the sender is authorized; and

     providing the communication to the recipient when it is determined that the sender is authorized to send the communication to the recipient.

[c84]   84.   The method of claim 83 wherein the communication is a letter delivered to a postal service addressed from the sender to the recipient.

[c85]   85.   The method of claim 84 wherein the requesting of authorization information includes sending a communication via the postal service to the sender.

[c86]   86.   The method of claim 84 wherein the authorization information is received from the sender via a computer system.

[c87]   87.   The method of claim 84 wherein the authorization information is received from the sender via a web page.

[c88]   88.   The method of claim 84 wherein the authorization information is received from the sender via a telephone call.

[c89]   89.   The method of claim 83 wherein the communication is a telephone call placed from the sender to the recipient.

[c90]   90.   The method of claim 89 wherein the requesting of authorization information is performed by answering the telephone call.

[c91]   91.   The method of claim 90 wherein the authorization information is received from the sender in response to instructions provided by answering the telephone call.

[c92]   92.   The method of claim 83 wherein the sender is identified by a caller identifier associated with the telephone call.

[c93]   93.   A method in a computer system for sending a communication from a sender to a recipient, the method comprising:

sending a communication to the recipient;

receiving a request for authorization information from an authorization system; and

providing the requested authorization information to the authorization system

so that the authorization system can verify the authorization information, can provide the communication to the recipient when the authorization information is verified, and not provide the communication to the recipient when the authorization system is not verified.

[c94]   94.   The method of claim 93 wherein the computer system is the sender's computer.

[c95]   95.   The method of claim 93 wherein the request for authorization information is received via an electronic mail message.

[c96]   96.   The method of claim 93 wherein the requested authorization information is provided via a web page.

[c97]   97.   The method of claim 93 wherein the requested authorization information is a response to a Turing test.